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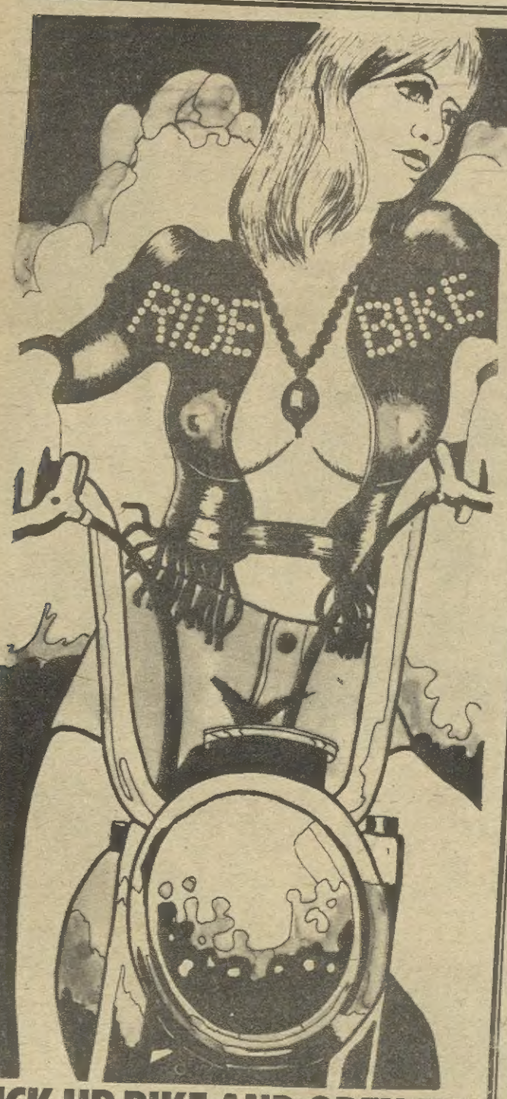

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Monsters of the Deep

In which the Demon Barber of Detroit – that's friendly ol' LESTER BANGS (you know Lester)– tries his darndest to dislike DEEP POIPLE but ... just ...can't ... quite ... make it

I'M SITTING on Deep Purple's jet waiting to take off from Detroit Metro. The accommodations are luxurious and the general mood is a Saturday afternoon junior high school field trip. Somebody slips a video-cassette of "Fat City" with Stacy Keach into the TV and the sense of disjuncture is mildly phasing — I dunno whether to watch the flicks, look out of the window or try to interview their manager. There's the sense that I wanna get everthing in at once, though maybe that's because I know there's only so much information culled once I succumb to the magnetism of that bar over the left wing. Or maybe I'm trying too hard. Everbody is having a good time, neither partying it up nor creaking through seeming mornings after. What about all those tales of sleaze and distorto of these things? Maybe I am on a field trip.

I'm here reportaging almost as much as Tom Jack Kerouac coulda been here if he'd had the sense to stay alive, and it's the same dream flight downriver except nobody on this plane is as interesting as Neal Cassady. But you are; hang on.

DEEP PURPLE put out six albums of the same mung. Good mung, but nevertheless. Which is not to denigrate mung — Carly Simon is mung — but the point is THEY KNOW IT. And they have a sense of humour about it. And they have survived and prospered off their well-considered droppings. Which holds a moral somewhere but I'm not gonna be bitchy enough to spoon it up. They're sitting on top of Starship One, the magnajet which is so heavy that not only have Alice Cooper and the Moody Blues painted their logos on its flank, but it's the first airplane to have its own PR agency. And Deep Purple don't even care.

The question is, should you? I say yes. You bought their records, I would too, but the essential moral of this story is that you should care more than usual — not because they don't but because they have that option and have in all pragmatism opted for caring just enough to sustain while laughing at themselves for doing so. Which is an enviable position from any direction, and gives them more latitude than certain presently unnamed peer bands who have more to lose because they've still got their sweaty palms heavily on the chips that are about to be scattered cross the table like Patti Page died all over again. Whether they use this latitude is strictly their business, but my business is to turn the mystery therein to stale oatmeal, so grab my hand while you can and lemme clue ya.

I'M AT the bar piling my plate with non-potables when perfect host Garry George applies steerage: "Why don't you go up and talk to Ritchie Blackmore? He's very shy."

But wry. Ritchie Blackmore, lead guitarist of Deep Purple who is more admired for playing mahavishnesque zip codes with his literal toenails than any other pickin' fool in the world, is a calmly elusive fellow with a sense of humour undoubtedly missed by many a prefrontal clubfoot. So naturally I hit him with my usual verbosity:

The question that constantly occurs to me on the level of what I'm doing — Ritchie, babes, old pal — is that I write about the same kind of hands all the time . . . like, if you would accept that you and say Black Sabbath are more or less idiomatically the same . . . and here I am doing a story on you, which I have done before and it's a challenge to me because I would like to come up with a new angle so that it won't be boring not only to me to write but for the reader to read unless the reader is a stone Deep Purple fan. And it occurs to me that the same thing must occur to you, that doing the same thing over and over again, as long as there's a market for it is nice, but you must get a sense of frustration at not breaking out into something different.

"Well, you get that in any business. I like the music I'm playing; it's very limited, in a sense, but it can be exciting, which it is. It's a thing you either feel or you don't . . . We don't want to come on in Sherman tanks, throw mushrooms at people and have smoke coming down the stage."

Then you couldn't see youself utilizing extramusical elements to juice up the act; yet you walk up and down on your guitar.

"Yeah that's just something I feel I like to do."

Like calesthenics you mean.

"Yeah, I always wanted to play with my toes . . . I thought it would feel good. I should imagine a person if they had no hands might get into something . . . You know Django Reinhardt? He was my idol. He could only move his hand, and he created fantastic music."

Oh, you're saying your music would be more authentic if it had a little gimpitude in it.

"No." *Well, how did you first decide to play with your toes?*

"I haven't yet. I've played with my feet, but not actually with my toes."

Did you do it from considerations that you could get a new sound out of the guitar or that you actually wanted to stomp up and down on the son of a bitch?

"No. I just wanted to play with my toes but I figured it would be easier to play with my feet."

People would be very impressed. I'd like to see B.B. King play with his toes sometime. You say you're a very quiet, not overly demonstrative person. Do you ever get the feeling that people expect you to be some kinda charismatic baboon, come out and play like a flaming idiot?

"I don't really care what they expect. That's why I like this business, I can talk to whoever I want to and then just go to work."

So if I was to write: "The brooding mysterious Ritchie Blackmore . . ." I could cancel all quotes, would you like that better?

"Yeah."

YES FOLKS, it's augmentation time, and good for it. Previous to the recording of their new album, "Burn", old singer Ian Gillan and bassist Roger Glover were replaced by David Coverdale and bassist/vocalist Glenn Hughes respectively. Now David is lounging in a suite at the Buffalo, N.Y. Holiday Inn, smoking one of my cigars and surveying the American continent which is suddenly at his feet. And I do mean suddenly.

"When I went down for the audition with the band I didn't expect to get it. I thought they were going to say, 'Why don't you do a solo thing,' or 'Your voice isn't the sort we're looking for.' I'm 22, I got the job when I was 21. It was a good birthday present. I was working as a salesman in a boutique. And I was singing semi-professionally two or three nights a week. That was white contemporary soul, bootblacking. And I've wanted to make it in music for many years. Every year I would think, Well, I'm 18 and I've done nothing. Now I'm 19 and I've done nothing. A month before I got the job I was in such a neurotic state, and I was sitting in the boutique reading the music press: they said 'Deep Purple is looking for a singer.' And this guy said to me, 'Why don't you go after it?' And then sort of laughed, and I laughed. I'd never considered it, that that could be me . . . I rang up and they said we have to have a tape and photograph.

"I had a photo that was three years old, and a tape I'd done one night when I was dead drunk, a boogie version of Bill Withers' version of 'Everybody's Talkin'.' How he sings 'Only the shadows of my mind,' I was singing 'Only the shekels ub muh . . .' It was real *crap!* So I made a copy tape, turning the volume down for the parts where my voice cracked reaching for a high note. But what the group got into was the depth of my voice and my phrasing."

IAN PAICE who bangs the drums for this crew, is a wise-mouthed little bratsky whom I was introduced to on the level of "Here is one of the few people around with as many nasty things to say about everybody as you."

On the contrary I found the little snood more than informative. However, I led with both left hookaramas: *How come you don't wear makeup?*

"Because I'm so beautiful I don't need it."

People think you're a chink though.

"Really?"

Yeah . . . slant eyes . . .

"Uh. . ."

Oh well, so much for the interview. All right, let's talk about sex. I gottta juice this article up a little bit. Tell me some of the exciting things that have happened to you recently.

"Ha, ha, ha."

Well you sure are a boring sonofabitch, what kind of a story am I gonna get outa this? C'mon you can level with us:

"I know, but. . ."

You got a wife at home or what?

"No, but . . . two days touring, what can you expect?"

Yeah. I know it doesn't always work out. Everybody thinks that you guys are sitting up here with chicks and dope and everything. Little do they suspect that you're sitting in a broom closet jerking off to your copy of Leather Ladies *. . . taking valium . . . you realise of course, that I'm putting out all the good lines in this. You're not picking 'em up.*

"I don't give a shit."

Oh well, Wanna watch TV?

"Why don't I interview you?"

That's a good idea.

"How long you been a writer?"

At this moment new bassist Glenn Hughes lumbered into the room for his share of this tonsilitic jailai. *Hey,* I inspired, reading my Bazooka Joe fortune, *why don't you guys turn into a bubblegum group?*

Ian: "We're not good enough."

That's what Lou Reed said. Okay, Glenn, Mr. Purple Virgo, what's your claim to fame?

"I joined this band called Deep Pink Floyd. Logged slog with a band called Trapeze for about four years who were totally ignored. Ian saw me playing at the Whisky in L.A., and thought I was terrible. I've known the boys for about 14 or 15 months. Went to see them at Madison Square Garden, we talked business and that was it."

Who would you say is the predominant influence in your vocal style? Gilbert O'Sullivan?

"Christ no. I don't like any new singers whatsoever. I am a totally American black music freak, and I totally missed out on the Shadows era. I grew up on Wilson Pickett."

So how has ascendance into the status of superstar within the Elysian ranks of Deep Purple changed your social life? Can you feel the vibes just glowing off your body?

"Nowt. Absolutely nothing at all. I'm working with a bunch of idiots now, I've gotta follow in the tradition. So maybe soon I'll start bein' naughty. But I'm clean so far. I don't get off on groupies, I'll tell ya that."

You feel that they're unclean?

"I do. There's nethin' weird about me, I'm as normal as the next guy." He belched. "Although I am an arrogant, conceited bastard."

THE CONCERT was fantastic. Last time I saw this group in Detroit, with Gillan and Glover, I thought they were true trotting slopbucket, but this night they laid it on and stomped it out till I saw kids at the edge of the stage pounding on it with their fists, shaking thier rangy manes in jivaro amokéry. It was heartening, to say the least.

But still the jade in the marrow must bob up and snarl, so when I caught organist and unofficial leader Jon Lord in the lobby of the Holiday Inn afterwards I was something less than temperate, owing no doubt as much to advanced integration with the ferment of the firmament as to pure proviso cavils. Jon, as always, was a gentleman, and a very frank one.

Previous to "Burn" I plunged, a lot of people had the feeling that Deep Purple were opportunistic musical journeymen grinding out a product which was essentially the same for several albums.

"You really put it down doncha Lester? I thought we were friends. You're about 50 per cent right, but I am gonna qualify that. There's no way I'm gonna put down Mr. Gillan or Mr. Glover. "Who Do We Think We Are" was a crappy album. "Fireball" was a crappy album. But "Deep Purple In Rock" and "Machine Head" were brilliant albums."

What was so brilliant about 'em? I said, even though I half agreed.

"They were a very good example of what we're good at, which is being a rock 'n' roll band. Which is a label, but it's the only way I know to describe us.

"In spite of what we all wish we could be, rock 'n' roll is still a business. You can't escape it. I mean — look at what goes on. If you don't feel like going on and doing it one night, I mean that's tough titty, isn't it? You know about contracts: in spite of how marvellous your record company may be they still have that contract that says it's two albums a year, man. Rock 'n' roll isn't what it used to be. Do you remember when you used to drink in clubs, because no one else would have you, and when you and I couldn't sit here and do what we're doing now because he couldn't have customers becoming drunk in his lobby? That was more about rock 'n' roll than any of this — "

That's too easy, though.

"But I've lived through it."

"It's also very easy to say that you've paid your dues.

"I refuse to say that — but I did. I'm 32 years old, and this is my eleventh year playing that thing."

An occupational hazard of what you're doing is that people will take you for granted.

"I'm not complaining."

I know you're not, I said, *and that's why I want to go on to the next point. Jim Morrison could take down his pants but you go on, and you do what you do. Deep Purple is a formulaic band. So do you ever get to the point where you would like to commit formulaic suicide because you know that beyond that you could go on and nobody would know the difference?*

"Yes."

What I'm saying is that you're in a good position, because you're a star band now because you have a formula, and you can milk this formula as far as it'll go. But you also have the prerogative to dance on that formula, turn it on its head, blow it to pieces. I've liked Deep Purple for a long time, and I would like to see you take this identity which has given you success, and crush that identity to transcend it.

"What can I say except that I totally agree with you and the only other thing is that you make it very difficult to come

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BANGS on PURPLE

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back with anything that's not the least bit facile, easy. Strange ground, this . . . What do you want me to do?"

I don't know, I laughed.

"Do you want me to suddenly come up and say, 'I'm fed up with being Jon Lord, I wanna be Rick Wakeman?'"

No Rick Wakeman's a schmuck.

"He can work these." Wiggles his fingers.

So can Peter Duchin.

"Well that's almost making my point. This is what I do, this is my job; I happen to get my rocks off doing it."

But is there a level where it becomes no longer a job, where it becomes something almost dangerous . . . a level where . . . look, when people see Deep Purple come onstage, they know what to expect and that's good, because they pay good money to see an exciting rock show. But what if people came to see Deep Purple AND THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEY WERE GOING TO SEE? And that's the promise that Deep Purple never lived up to, if it was ever there in the first place.

"Tell me a band that lived up to that."

The Stooges. Who may be failures. Essentially I'm asking the impossible of you. But the feeling I get from you is that you are not satisfied with just being a riff band, but it has worked for you . . . and as a listener, I'm bored with listening to your music, with listening to rock 'n' roll. Not just because I get all the records; because it's all the same.

"Why do you still write it then?"

For the same reason you still play it.

We both laughed. "All right. Not quite the same reason, Lester."

But I make up new words.

"You certainly do. I never read words like that before. I occasionally make a few new sounds. There's two words I want to use: content and satisfied. I'm content with what I do, but not self-satisfied."

You could very easily say Fuck you, I've done everything that's expected of me: but instead you're going along with me.

"Well, you're an intelligent man, and I should be able to take your criticisms. If I can't take criticism, I should go and sweep streets. Because the easiest way to get criticism is to join my business. Or yours, after that ELP article."

Nobody, I nudged on, *expects the unexpected from Deep Purple. Which isn't even a criticism, since there isn't any avant-garde anymore. But I get the feeling that you're tired of throwing out the expected; but you could do something that would surprise everybody. And what I am essentially looking for is the sound of surprise, which I don't hear anywhere right now. And especially I don't hear it from the people who claim to be parlaying it, who are the most boring farts on the face of the earth. I mean I don't care if I never hear another Mahavishnu Orchestra album.*

"They said it all on one album. But didn't you ever get the sound of surprise from the Mahavishnu Orchestra?"

Three years ago, yeah.

"So they did—it once. So aren't they perhaps victims of the same kind of trap that you suspect we're victims of?"

Sure, everybody's victims of the same trap. So what I'm asking you is have you got any idea of how to break out of the trap without even being particularly avant garde? Nobody is doing that right now. And a riff here and a riff there is nothing, but . . . people are falling asleep.

"Well, I would like to think that if we did anything at all we were a band that at least didn't allow you to fall asleep. Aren't you asking more of rock 'n' roll than it's prepared to give?"

I don't think so. And the obvious answer for you to give would be to say well why don't you do it? Which is what most musicians would say.

"That's too easy. That presupposed hundreds of things. I presume you have had that answer before. I would consider the guy that gave you that answer a prick. I'm not going to try to sell you on me, but forgive me for 25 seconds. The first English organist to even bother to use any other kind of music, classical or whatever, was not Keith Emerson, or Rick Wakeman, it was me. I was schlepping up and down England doing the clubs, putting my Bach riffs in two years before Emerson even thought about it. So who gives a shit? If I played Bach's 'Third Partita For Violin and Crumhorn,' people would go hmm, and if I would flick two fingers and turn the Leslie on: WHMMMMMMM! People would go WHOOOOO! So where's that all at? And what does that tell me about the people I'm playing to?"

Do you ever get a sense of cynicism about your audience?

"No, that's one thing I never get. Because forgive me for the old showbiz schelp, but if they didn't do it, I couldn't do it."

Yeah, but you know that all you'll have to do is put your elbow in there and go WHEEE and they'll love it.

"Yeah, but there comes a point where I used to put my elbow down and they all made a face."

But that was two years ago.

"But now I sell records."

Now you sell records, so what?

"What is the difference? You tell me?"

The difference is that you know how much more you can get away with now. I know how much I can get away with, and I gotta put down words. All you gotta do is put down an elbow.

"That's unfair."

Okay, but you know what I mean.

"You see, I'll tell you all we've really been talking about is the gradual demise of the rock 'n' roll business."

No, the rock 'n' roll business goes on forever. What we're talking about is the gradual demise of what you've been doing.

"Well, what about the demise of what you've been doing?"

Well, hell, if I go on like this for 15 years I'll be Ralph J. Gleason. Rock 'n' roll is a short life span. What does Joni Mitchell say, it's the nature of the race. And it's true, You're journeymen. And journeymen go so far. Yet I know that you are smarter than a journeyman, so I wonder if there is not something in you that can take it past that point. To the point of mattering. Because I don't think Deep Purple matters. But then perhaps I put too much emphasis on words, that something would be a hit not because it's great riff but because it "says something."

"I don't have to prove anything to anybody. You're pushing me, but that's cool, because I like you. Because you're the only guy in America who gave "Machine Head" a good review."

The Stooges, I push, *are the ultimate heavy metal band.*

"I don't believe you're saying that. I personally think the Stooges are a load of shit."

But the Stooges mean something. When Iggy sings, "I'm a streetwalkin' cheetah with a heart full of napalm, I'm the runaway son of the nuclear A-bomb," that means something.

"Okay, what does 'A wop bop a loo bop a lop bam boom' mean?"

YOU GOT me there. The main thing is all your music is riffs with no meaning behind them. But the obvious question is, why should you mean?

"Well, that's what I was gonna ask you. But you asked me."

I think we're going around in circles here anyway, I said. It was getting late.

He smiled, "It's fun to go around in circles, though, isn't it?"